

**HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES
ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

STATEMENT BY
MR MARIO VILLARROEL LANDER

*President of the International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*

I shall speak today of a bright prospect for our world which can become a reality if we all believe in it and work together for it.

I express this hope in the same spirit that prevailed at the first International Conference — convened 132 years ago — which overcame the misgivings of the sceptics and led to the creation of the initial Geneva Convention. That treaty conferred protection on wounded and sick soldiers in time of war and on those who cared for them. Since then, the same protection has been given in international law to wounded and sick members of the armed forces at sea, prisoners of war, civilians in wartime and -- to some extent owing to the change in the nature of conflict over recent decades -- vulnerable victims of civil strife.

Prior to the adoption of the Geneva Conventions, few would have believed this possible. But now in this era, many do not know of their existence, some ignore their provisions and others apply them inadequately.

Meanwhile, the spirit of selfless dedication that saw the light of day in 1863 has grown into a network of 169 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, with some 20 more in the process of formation, two international bodies that, each in its own sphere, aid millions of vulnerable people every year, and 186 States signatory to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, a good number of which have signed the Protocols additional to those Conventions.

Therefore, thanks to the humanitarian impetus of the States gathered here and the international network of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, there is an enormous force in the world today directed towards caring for the most vulnerable.

It is because this force exists and works that I can speak here of hopes and be sure that they will be fulfilled.

I envisage a world in which the numbers of people killed or injured in natural or man-made disasters can diminish rather than continue to increase at a rate of some 10 million a year, threatening to exceed half a billion by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

How, you will ask, can such a hope become a reality? Can earthquakes and typhoons, erupting volcanoes and flooding rivers be stopped? No. But frightening headlines aside, the fact is that there is little change in the number of natural disasters from one year to another. The disaster toll rises because more and more people build their homes in places that may be the only areas available — on earthquake faults, on lowlands subject to storm and river flooding, on slopes subject to lava flows, mudslides and avalanches. So many people do not have the resources to cope with or recover from a disaster.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent bodies can encourage and States can promote safe-area building practices and disaster-resistant construction. People can be helped to develop disaster-preparedness measures. Emergency relief operations can be conducted in such a way that rehabilitation programmes and sustainable development are built-in from the very first assessment of the victims' needs. States, in their generosity to the emergency relief agencies, can insist on relief actions being designed and carried out in such a way as to strengthen people's self-reliance rather than their dependence.

In this optimistic perspective, there would no longer be such a troublesome distinction between emergency response and development funding — with emergency response funding on an upward trend and development funding on a downward course. Indeed, all funds raised for the world's most vulnerable must meet the twin purpose of healing wounds and strengthening people in their ability to care for themselves and for others. How to accomplish this in all situations is going to take some careful thinking, but the practical examples we have are already showing good results.

Another of my hopes for the coming years lies in encouraging people to embrace the volunteer spirit and translate it into action. Every nation would thus have a core of volunteers ready to help whenever an emergency arises and to find ways to improve the situation of vulnerable individuals.

In some countries there is already a long-standing tradition of volunteer work. In others this tradition is more recent. In any event, a moment of reflection will make it clear to any State or person that when trained volunteers are ready to help in an emergency, the cost of assistance is less and aid is more efficient. This sets an excellent example of what everyone can do for others and also builds

up the community's capacity to respond, binding its members in the common goal of mutual assistance.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, working on the basis of the Movement's Fundamental Principles, can certainly give genuine and practical meaning to their mission, especially in their capacity as "auxiliaries to the public authorities". Every National Society can play a vital role, however scarce its material resources. Every State that cares about its people should look to its National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society as a useful partner in building up capacity for self-reliance in all sectors of the population, so that they can take autonomous action whenever accident, disease or disaster strikes.

People in general need to think of volunteer work as a career parallel to their regular jobs and as a long-term commitment. This too is possible.

Another role that I foresee for the International Federation and for the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is to take the lead in reflecting on and advocating humanitarian issues. Red Cross and Red Crescent leaders have sometimes been wary of such a role, fearing it to be too political.

Yet, who else but ourselves is in a better position to observe and assess the adverse effects of ethnic strife, discrimination against minorities, natural disasters and UN sanctions that inadvertently affect innocent people?

Was Henry Dunant too political in advocating the lessons to be drawn from his experience at Solferino before all the courts of Europe? Was Henry Davison too political in seeking the support of governments for the action of the League of Red Cross Societies in devastated Europe after the First World War? We need to follow their examples with courage and do our best to develop humanitarian action in a sensitive and discriminating way and exercise our influence to make sure that it is implemented. By this I mean that the Red Cross and Red Crescent should be the spokesman of the world's most vulnerable, a voice that is heeded by all peoples and States.

Now let me put forward some ideas on how we can work together to improve our cooperation in the future.

First of all, the Conference itself meets far too rarely. Nine years have elapsed since the last Conference. That is too long. Because there is no dialogue between the Red Cross and Red Crescent and the States, in our opinion the latter have begun looking elsewhere for a venue to discuss protection of the vulnerable, and peace-keeping and peace-making issues.

Could we not imagine that in the period between two Conferences there would be a working group made up of representatives of States and of the components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, mandated to develop proposals

to be submitted for adoption at the next Conference? I believe that it would be possible to organize and finance a process of this nature if we are all determined to achieve that goal.

The world is undergoing great upheaval, and we in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies are ready to hear views other than our own, hoping that in turn State representatives and our Red Cross and Red Crescent colleagues are ready to listen to ours.

The number of unresolved questions of humanitarian import is perhaps greater now than ever before. We need to be more aware that while we discuss the various matters on our agenda and debate our resolutions people are suffering all over the world; we must strive ever harder to find solutions.

For example, we should give more regular and substantive thought to the humanitarian consequences of sanctions and peace-making operations.

It is not the role of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to decide whether peace-making operations or sanctions are justified, but it is our business to examine with the States the problem of the humanitarian consequences of such measures.

In this connection, perhaps we need an internationally accepted code of conduct which applies to all situations of this type. A code of conduct in disaster situations has been drawn up by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with the help of several organizations, and is being endorsed by a growing number of international emergency relief agencies. Would it not be possible to design something similar to deal with unforeseen consequences of sanctions and peace-making operations?

We need to go on working together, given that we each play a complementary role in addressing the needs of victims of both man-made and natural disasters. We must also explore other possible means of limiting the risk of conflict.

These are but a few examples of unresolved humanitarian issues facing all of us, whether we belong to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement or to the humanitarian agencies operating in various States.

There are other issues as well. Let us ask ourselves, for example, if we need all of the international organizations that are now working in the humanitarian field, all of them to some degree or another duplicating each other's efforts? Or should we return to the essence of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, with National Societies acting as auxiliaries to the public authorities, as is required in the recognition process, and establish more reliable support structures and a greater level of Red Cross and Red Crescent accountability?

In the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies we have learned over our 76 years of existence that mankind's greatest achievements have been attained by caring, diligent people working together, each with a talent of his own, in an atmosphere of cooperation and respect. It is by standing united that we — States, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies — shall find the humanitarian answers that are needed.

I have no illusions that my proposals will be easy to implement.

I do not claim to know the answers to many questions facing us in our search for humanitarian solutions. But what I do know is that the Red Cross and Red Crescent must put these difficult questions to the States and must use common sense to solve them and propose solutions. Hence my suggestions.

Every day, we in the Red Cross and Red Crescent come to the aid of innocent people wounded in landmine explosions whose only wish is to resume their normal activities.

Among the millions of people we assist every year so many are refugees or displaced persons. Seventy percent of the cost of our field operations relate to helping these refugees and displaced persons. For many of them, shelter and food are not enough. Many are traumatized after being driven from their homes, assaulted, raped, and deprived of their human rights and dignity. In helping them we in essence have to restore to them the ability to contend with each day and to keep hope.

We need to help the world rediscover the values of civil society, and the worth of working together for the greater well-being of all. We strive for that goal in ways that might seem mundane: but the support they provide is important, however, in areas such as teaching first aid and looking after the sick, helping overcome epidemics, teaching how to care for the frail and elderly, AIDS sufferers and the disabled. A community where the discipline of caring is alive is a community less likely to go to war.

We therefore have an interest and a duty, in both emergencies and times of stability, to enhance the capacity of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in their own countries to be more effective servants of humanitarian needs, more effective auxiliaries to the public authorities, more effective catalysts in easing local tensions and differences that are a potential source of conflict and in reconciling the divided, so that they can play a leading role in the search for solutions to humanitarian problems and issues.

Clearly, we could not stand aside from such issues even if we wanted to. It is not that we in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are

looking for more to do. We already have more than enough problems to solve. But as the world evolves it confronts us with these needs and concerns, saying: Do something for these people, help them, heal their wounds, find a way of bringing greater meaning and dignity to their lives.

If you fear that the responsibility is too great, then I would ask you to look again at the seven Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Read them and ask yourself what they mean in this troubled world where we are trying to give our compassion a tangible form on behalf of all mankind. We must redouble our efforts to give real meaning to those principles and the values underlying them in all countries, and to apply them in helping to rebuild countries torn by strife.

This is a task that no one can undertake alone. Only by pooling forces across the world, as is done in this Conference of States and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, is it possible to seek and find the compassion and care so badly needed in the world of today.

Hence my appeal to the States and organizations you represent: I ask the States to contribute to the quest for real solutions to the urgent humanitarian issues besetting the whole world and to help their National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies build their local programming and organizational capacities. I ask the international and national Red Cross and Red Crescent bodies to work together to bring relief to vulnerable people the world over, so that those people can look to them as a source of help and protection.

And I urge both the States and all the components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to join together in a new and powerful worldwide network to seek practical solutions to the problems and consequences of human conflict, and to overcome deprivation and vulnerability, so that our joint endeavour at this International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and in those to come will bear fruit in the form of an era of genuine peace and compassion.

Thank you.